

State offers inmates help for life on the outside

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"We get a lot of folks who want to tour (PREF). When I presented at that conference, it was clear to me that behind Commissioner (J. David) Donahue's push for re-entry, we are definitely moving fast and aggressively."

David Burch, Director of Re-Entry

PLAINFIELD- As the new director of re-entry for the Indiana Department of Correction, David Burch has a message to everyone about the inmates: "They're coming home. They're coming to our communities. That's why we need to prepare them. We talk about a toolbox - we're going to fill it with opportunity. How they use that opportunity will hopefully help them succeed." Burch, who previously served as director of case management for the IDOC, says 97 percent of those incarcerated will be released. Last year 16,000 statewide were freed. With figures like that, Burch believes the old mindset of locking them up and throwing away the key is no longer plausible.

"We have to do something different," he said. "Preparing them for release is part of that process." It's that kind of thinking that has pushed Indiana to the forefront of re-entry initiatives. From focusing on employment to fostering faith- and character-based programs, the state has seen its recidivism rate drop considerably.

"We have a waiting list (for these programs), which tells you the impact of it," Burch said. But the IDOC isn't just talking the talk with re-entry. It's walking the walk with the Plainfield Re-Entry Facility (PREF), the first of its kind in the nation. Here inmates who are soon to be released live and work in a college-like setting. If it wasn't for the tall fence topped with barbed wire snaking the perimeter, you'd think you were back on campus.

"If we're going to talk about emulating the real world, we need to start with that right here," Burch said.

And they do, with programs like the collaboration they have with Lincoln Bank that allows inmates to open limited checking accounts. They can use debit cards to eat in the PREF's sports-themed deli. It also

gives them a leg up after release. The IDOC also is working with the state's Bureau of Motor Vehicles to get photo IDs for all released inmates. But one of the main concerns in re-entry is finding employment for released offenders. The Department of Workforce Development is trying to determine where released offenders work, the type of work they do, and their average salaries so the IDOC can better target potential employers. One of the biggest obstacles is simply overcoming the odium attached to these people. "There is a stigma, and that's a shame," Burch said. "People make mistakes. But obviously they're sent to prison, and that's their punishment."

To help counter it, the IDOC does everything from the aforementioned to furnishing dress clothes offenders can wear to job interviews. There's one person at PREF whose sole responsibility is to help inmates find work upon their release.

"Whatever we can do prior to release (we'll do), which will better equip the released offender to gain employment, get housing, and, with the BMV initiative, hopefully get transportation," Burch said. "We look at those three areas as the keys to a successful re-entry, as well as family support."

Burch considers Indiana to be a leader in the re-entry push. Others think so too. In April Burch gave a presentation at the National Offender Workforce Development Conference in Charlotte, N.C., attended by state representatives nationwide and even some from Europe.

"My purpose would be for other states to model us," Burch said. "We get a lot of folks who want to tour (PREF). When I presented at that conference, it was clear to me that behind Commissioner (J. David) Donahue's push for re-entry, we are definitely moving fast and aggressively."

One of the nice aspects for Burch is, after 12 years in the field, he sees the positive change he helps facilitate. It comes in the form of letters from previous inmates, seeing people he used to work with, and having some of them come back and talk about what they learned to current inmates.

"I see results from 12 years ago," Burch said. "You run into people constantly. When we release an offender, I know we've given them the tools to succeed."

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About The Department of Correction

The Department employs over 8,000 employees and houses 24,000 adult and juveniles in 32 facilities, ranging from minimum to maximum custody, prison camps, juvenile facilities and work release centers. The Department's home page on the Internet can be found at: <http://www.in.gov/indcorrection>. The

Department's Re-entry Site can be found: <http://www.reentry.in.gov>.